

Draft Oxfordshire Countryside Access Management Plan 2014-2024

Short summary document
please refer to the full document at
www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip

This document is a shorter summary version of the second statutory Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) for Oxfordshire which is available at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip. This iteration of the plan has been called the Countryside Access Management Plan (CAMP) to bring more weight and focus to the management of existing access, and include the other access resources that the public use, regardless of which organisation manages them. The plan covers public rights of way and accessible natural green spaces within rural settlements and urban areas as well as the public rights of way and accessible countryside surrounding villages, towns and Oxford.

The County Council is required to produce a RoWIP under s60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This plan is one of the 'daughter' documents of the third Local Transport Plan (LTP). The LTP sets out the County Council's vision for roads and transport.

Contents

Introduction	1
Key policy and strategy areas influencing/influenced by the Countryside Access Management Plan, and analysis of demands and use	2
Achieving better countryside access through the Countryside Access Management Plan and the Vision and Aims	5
The Oxfordshire Countryside Access Framework diagram	6
Countryside Access Management: Managing and prioritising issues on the network	7
Local communities, neighbourhoods and volunteer participation summary and diagrams	8
CAMP Summary	10

1) The CAMP helps meet the following strategic objectives of the Oxfordshire Local Transport Plan:

Develop and increase cycling and walking for local journeys, recreation and health: This is a core outcome of the CAMP and the plan's main focus along with equestrian access.

Secure infrastructure and services to support development: New sites benefit from being integrated with the internal and surrounding public rights of way in ways that allow the continued and increased use of the routes as part of a wider network and to meeting shared sustainable transport, healthy living and healthy environment goals.

Reducing congestion: A good local rights of way network in urban areas can provide alternatives to car use for short local journeys and longer recreational trips, especially at weekends.

Reducing casualties and dangers associated with travel: Walkers, cyclists and equestrians are all vulnerable road users and may be affected by vehicle speed, frequency and driver behaviour. Promoting and increasing the amount and location of traffic free routes for walkers, cyclists and horse riders, especially families, can help build confidence in public places and help to reduce accident levels. The availability of off road networks can reduce the conflict with motorised vehicles, particularly in more congested urban areas.

Improve accessibility to work, education and services: - A good local rights of way network can form part of a journey to neighbourhood services like schools, surgeries, bus stops, railway stations and shops which can increase choice and reduce the dependence on private cars or taxis.

Reduce carbon emissions from transport – Where it can offer a realistic alternative for local journeys, the access network can help reduce emissions through less car use.

Improve air quality, reduce other environmental impacts, and enhance the street environment - By offering alternatives to vehicle use, the countryside access network can help reduce emissions as people use cars less often. Paths and green spaces can form part of the urban street scene.

2) The CAMP contributes to health and wellbeing:

The use of the countryside access network has a valuable role to play in the physical and mental health of the people of Oxfordshire. The Countryside Access Management Plan aims to maintain and where possible improve public access and open-air recreation, including walking, cycling and horseriding to everyone in order to help the people in Oxfordshire to live healthier and happier lives. Oxfordshire County Council can play an important role in this agenda by:

- Maintaining and extending accessible public rights of way and green space areas to provide healthier green landscapes. Ensure access to up to date and relevant information about the public rights of way network.
- Supporting and enabling community and volunteer involvement in practical access initiatives.

3) The CAMP contributes to the local economy in the following ways:

Oxfordshire's countryside, paths and landscape contribute to it being an outstanding place in which to live, work and visit. Access to these provides significant economic, health and well-being and environmental benefits. Economic benefits come from encouraging businesses to locate within Oxfordshire by enabling both the direct and indirect facilities that make the county

an excellent place to work and do business. In addition, the economy is assisted by spending on goods and services in the local area when people are on walks and rides, and whilst visitors are attracted to the area to make use of the countryside. A well-maintained and connected public rights of way network, with information and improvements that meet the needs of users and potential users, offers almost unlimited potential for residents and visitors to enjoy all of Oxfordshire's countryside and landscape on foot, by bicycle and on horseback.

4) The extent of local rights of way and other access resources in Oxfordshire:

Access to Oxfordshire's countryside is predominantly achieved through the 2,600 mile (4,200km) of public rights of way in the county. In 2013 and according to the status of public rights of way as recorded on the Definitive Map and Statement, walkers should be able to use 100% of the network. Horse riders and cyclists should be able to use 879 miles, 1,417km (33.5%) of the network as bridleway, restricted byway and byway open to all traffic (BOAT). Horse carriage drivers should be able to use 204 miles, 330km (7.8%) of the network on restricted byways and BOATs. Motorised users should be able to use 48 miles, 78km (1.8%) of network on BOATs.

However all of these figures must be taken in the context of a sometimes disjointed, fragmented and obstructed network. Relatively small links or status upgrades could go a long way towards making the network more usable. It should be recognised however, that most of the network is on private land and therefore such improvements must be undertaken in negotiation with the landowner. The County Council will however actively seek to enable these links as and when opportunities through development arise or where landowners are agreeable to the necessary access to their land and where resources are available.

5) The accessibility of public rights of way and natural greenspace areas to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems:

Oxfordshire County Council seeks to enable a public rights of way and countryside access network that offers as few restrictions as is reasonably possible through its own work and that of partner organisations, farmers and landowners. These groups and individuals, especially parish councils, the South Chilterns Path Maintenance Volunteers, and the voluntary Cotswolds Wardens, have initiated, negotiated, obtained funding for and delivered many improvements over the life of the original RoWIP and it is hoped that this will continue.

The Countryside Access Team has undertaken a Service and Community Impact Assessment of the CAMP and this is available as a separate annex available at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip. The assessment's summary judgement is that *"The rights of way network is freely available, subject to the provisions of the various legislation. The network has developed historically and may not always be suitable for modern use. Stiles and other features on public rights of way can restrict and sometimes even prohibit access for some users, in particular the disabled, mobility impaired, visually impaired, the elderly and the very young could be at a particular disadvantage. The County Council will work with others to limit restrictions and encourage responsible access and try to manage and improve the network to meet current and future needs."*

6) Users' needs and demands:

The Countryside Access Team has undertaken a wide range of information gathering and primary research in order to contribute local perspectives to the CAMP, and also for the day-to-day management and improvement of the network. The top four suggestions for better maintenance and improvements are regularly:

More vegetation cutting: Users would like a greater frequency of summer and winter vegetation cutting, especially targeted on paths closer to settlements or on promoted/linking routes.

Increasing path surfacing and drainage: Users want easier surfaces so OCC needs to balance the benefits of surfacing paths for users, especially families and lower agility people, against the risk of urbanising or over-managing the countryside. We also need to guard against conflicts on multi-use paths (such as between cyclists and walkers on narrow routes).

Path protection: Users say that OCC should be making access easier for people with mobility impairments; including wheelchair users, older people and families with pushchairs. OCC need to speed up the removal of obstructions and work with land managers to prevent ploughing problems. Litter is seen as a problem on many routes, as is dog fouling and development of green spaces with housing.

Access to information: Users want OCC to improve this, as well as on-path and off-path signs and information. Many users say that they lack confidence and knowledge regarding their rights and responsibilities when out in the countryside.

Importantly, all of these factors will affect the likelihood of non-users wanting to, or being able to, access the countryside access network.

Oxfordshire County Council tries to meet these user needs as resources allow. The next section demonstrates how the County Council aims to manage the network.

7) Achieving better countryside access through the Countryside Access Management Plan

The first Rights of Way Improvement Plan was delivered in a climate of high expectations, which encouraged aspirational outcomes and actions. Although no Governmental grant funding was provided specifically for achieving the aims of the plan, by working closely with the Countryside Access Team, local communities, volunteers and other organisations, and the County Council itself, were still able to achieve a great deal by their own efforts and making use of external sources of funding.

Since the economic crisis of 2008 there has been increased scarcity of resources both within the public and voluntary sector. Promoting the network and seeking to improve the network's quality and accessibility are still important however, as they contribute directly to the local economy, as well making a big difference to the local environment and residents' sense of place and wellbeing.

By working closely with other authorities and organisations, local communities, volunteers and other stakeholders and partners it is hoped that we can bring added value to the rights of way and access network and work with the County Council to evolve the access network into one that best suits local needs.

An annual CAMP delivery/ business plan will set out aspirations and programme of activity for the coming year and this will help inform performance plans, targets and reports to stakeholders. All information will be on the dedicated web pages at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip.

Vision Statement

The Countryside Access Management Plan's vision statement broadly reflects that contained in the first RoWIP and sets out the authority's ambition:

Vision: To record and maintain the existing public rights of way and countryside access network for all users and would-be users, and where possible improve the extent, facilities, use and understanding of the network, so that public rights of way fulfil their role as a vital part of life in the County.

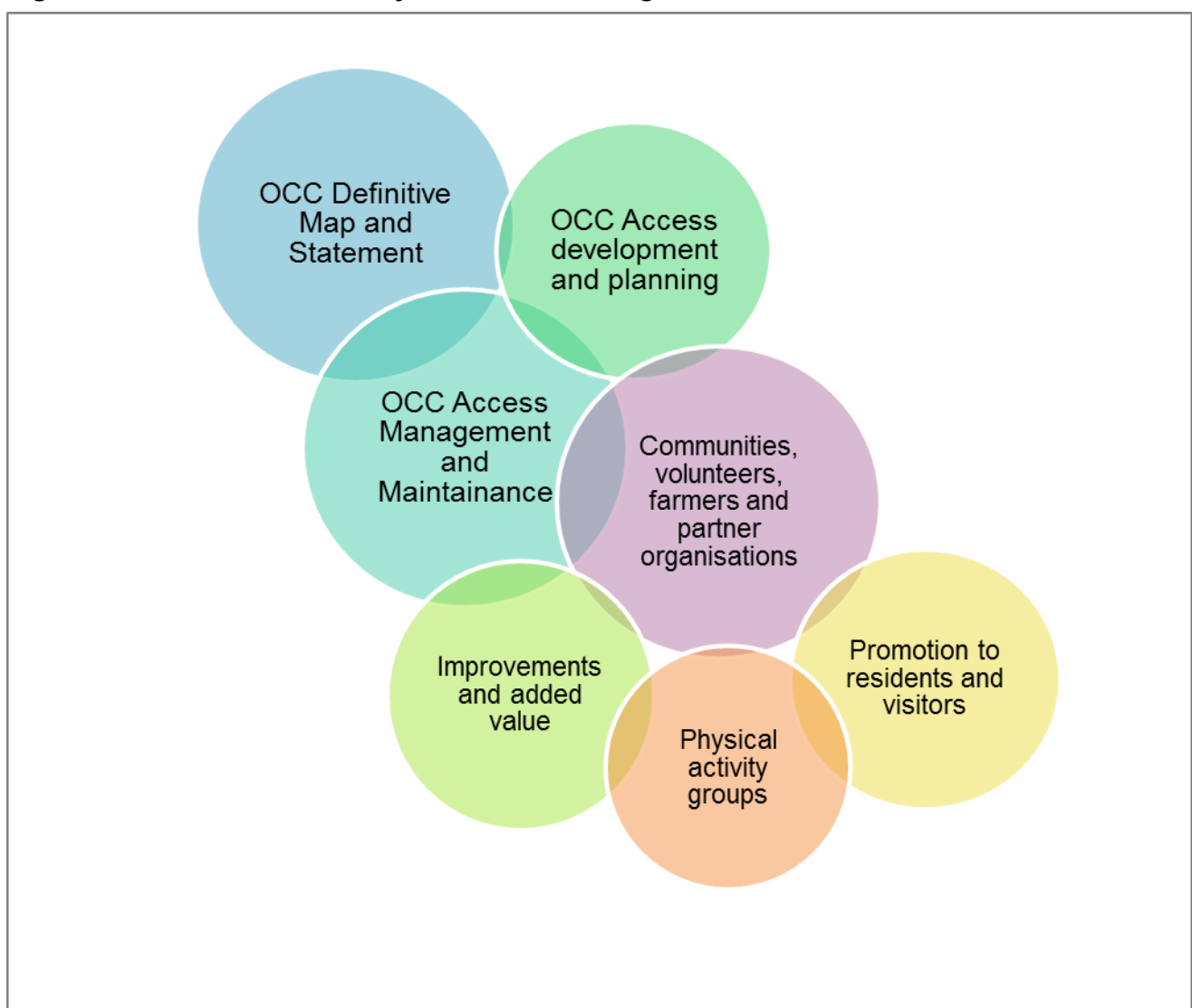
Aims:

1. Public rights of way are recorded, protected, maintained and promoted.
2. A public rights of way and countryside access network that adapts to balance the current and future needs of communities and users, farmers and landowners and the natural environment
3. A public rights of way and countryside access network which is as accessible as reasonably as possible to those with limited mobility, vision or understanding
4. Countryside access contributes to a thriving local economy and communities are able to be actively involved in caring for and promoting responsible walking and riding in their area

8) The Oxfordshire Countryside Access Management Framework

In order to achieve the vision and aims a countryside access framework has been produced, illustrated in Figure 9 and outlined in the sections 11 and 12 (much more detail is provided in the full version of the CAMP). This framework summarises the main areas of responsibility and how this may change over the life of the plan. The reason for developing a framework is to reinforce the interconnectedness of the areas of work undertaken and to set out how the aims of the CAMP will be achieved, but without being too prescriptive. This will allow the flexibility to evolve more detail based on available resources and any changes to legislation or the operating environment. The framework has evolved from experiences gained from the first RoWIP, research undertaken since the first RoWIP was adopted, the responses to the review consultation, and from work to develop the revised content for the assessment of need. The framework links into other strategies such as the Local Transport Plan and the Highway Asset Management Plan.

Figure 9: Oxfordshire's Countryside Access Management Framework



9) Countryside Access Management: Managing and prioritising issues on the network

Oxfordshire County Council's public rights of way management functions need to centre on ensuring that a basic standard of provision is maintained across the county's public rights of way network. Where possible, Oxfordshire County Council will seek to add value to that basic standard by working to secure additional resources and support and encourage farmers, land managers, local communities, groups, volunteers and individuals to improve the network for all users.

The basic level of provision is that, as far as reasonably practicable and where resources allow, public rights of way and associated routes are not made impassable by natural or man-made features, or their absence.

Where an issue is identified, Oxfordshire County Council will prioritise action to remove and resolve issues that impede or are likely to obstruct public access in accordance with the resources available. In order to do this an issue impact assessment(a) and a path categorisation model(b) will be used in combination alongside operational standards to enable decisions on relative priorities so the authority can make the best use of available resources.

a) Public rights of way issue impact assessment

Public rights of way issues reported to the County Council or identified through inspections will normally be assessed with regard to their impact. This assessment usually forms the main basis for priority setting. The impacts considered are:

- Overall level of hazard or risk that the issue represents
- The degree of obstruction, encroachment or inconvenience
- The cause and likely duration of problem
- The character of the route, its normal traffic and the route's normal state of repair
- The impact of the issue looking at the wider network

b) Public rights of way categorisation

Category 1

- Routes used as key routes to schools or local facilities and that are used by many people for daily commuting journeys
- Thames Path & Ridgeway National Trails and 'corridor' (the key routes that connect the trail to villages or facilities) in partnership with the National Trails Team

Category 2

- Key recreation or exercise routes near to settlements
- Oxfordshire County Council promoted routes
- District Council promoted routes
- National Cycle Network route (non-asphalt sections)
- Oxford Canal Walk and corridor in partnership with the Canal & Rivers Trust
- Named routes promoted and managed by a user group or organisation in liaison with OCC

Category 3

- The remainder of the network

Path categories by themselves will not normally define the management of an issue, but they will assist in deciding on the relative order or action for similar priority issues.

Keeping public rights of way available

For countryside access management and maintenance functions, Oxfordshire County Council works to the information contained in the Definitive Map and Statement (DMS). The DMS will be kept under review as required under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The DMS is conclusive proof of the existence of the recorded rights at the date of its production. However the DMS is conclusive without prejudice to the existence of higher rights and can be changed through due process if evidence is provided that the line or status recorded in the DMS is incorrect.

In very exceptional circumstances, and where budgets allow, we may undertake maintenance on routes not on the DMS.

The deliberate obstruction of any Public Right of Way will not be condoned by OCC and action will be taken to remedy any instances in line with operational standards.

10) Local community, neighbourhood and volunteer participation in countryside access maintenance, improvement and promotion

The County Council retains overall responsibilities for funding and maintaining the definitive map, and the operation of maintenance, enforcement, promotion and improvement activities.

However, many local communities, user and interest organisations, neighbourhoods, individual users, and land-managers play an active and valuable role in surveying, reporting, recording and managing public rights of way and countryside access in Oxfordshire. This involvement adds public benefit and quality to the network, demonstrates the importance of paths in people's local areas, and enables more people to enjoy access responsibly and safely. Oxfordshire County Council needs to continue to work with existing groups and individuals to make the best of their efforts and enthusiasm and to target resources where the work will make the most difference, and where possible, build up levels of new local participation across the county.

Needs and demands from existing groups and individuals as well potential new ones will have to be carefully managed so that the best outcomes for path users are achieved and demands on staff time are not excessive and ensure priority and legally-complex work can be undertaken.

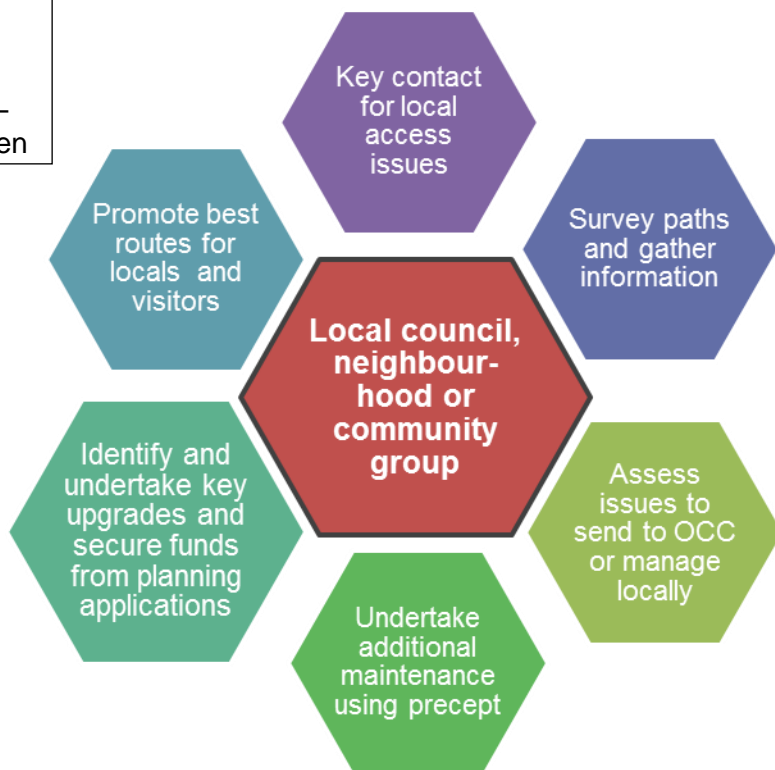
It is hoped that three types of partnerships between local communities and organisations with Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Team, outlined in the following diagrams, will become established and integrated with each other over time and lead to a countryside access network that enables partnership working to meet the needs of local people, as well as visitors, and leads to more people becoming involved in the protection and improvement of an important part of Oxfordshire's cultural heritage.

When considering the application of any or all of these elements in an officer's area or across the wider authority area, OCC officers will need to assess available capacity and budgets and the expected outcome of such involvement. This work also needs to be balanced against existing responsibilities and priorities. The Team will seek additional external resources and capacity to enable a proper investment in this to be made in order to achieve the best

outcomes for local communities, neighbourhoods and users of the public rights of way and countryside access network.

11a. Local Councils and neighbourhood/community groups – how their existing work or a new area of work could improve countryside access management

Figure 11:
Activities and
roles that could
be undertaken –
or are undertaken



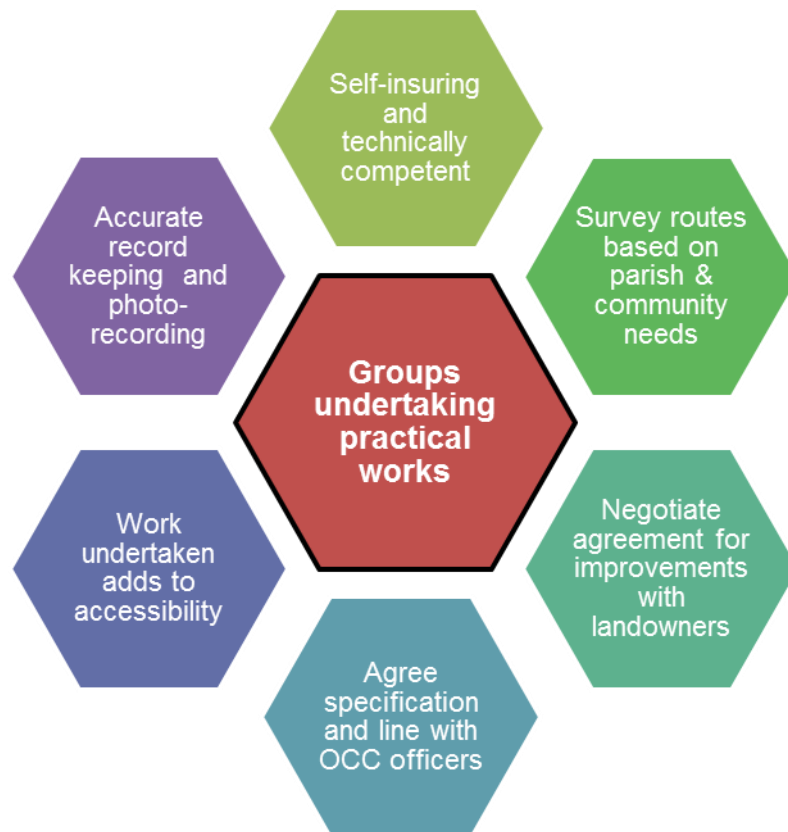
11b. Parish Path 'Wardens' – how this new concept could improve countryside access management

Figure 12: Activities
and roles that could
be undertaken – or
are undertaken
already



11c. Groups undertaking practical improvements – how their work can improve countryside access management

Figure 13: Activities and roles that could be undertaken – or are undertaken already



12. Summary

This Countryside Access Management Plan sets out Oxfordshire County Council's assessment, vision and aims for the management and improvement of the public rights of way and countryside access network. The County Council will try to meet its responsibilities and, by working closely with other authorities and organisations, local communities, volunteers and other partners, it is hoped that significant added value and improvements can be achieved.

An annual CAMP delivery/business plan will set out aspirations for the coming year covering all service areas and this will feed into team and individual performance plans and reports to stakeholders. The content of each year's business plan will be directly dependent on the level of resources that are available at that time. All information will be on the dedicated web pages at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip.

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